

What is mentoring?

Mentoring is a relationship which gives people the opportunity to share their professional and personal skills and experiences, and to grow and develop in the process.

Typically, it is a one-to-one relationship between a more experienced and a less experienced employee. It is based upon encouragement, constructive comments, openness, mutual trust, respect and a willingness to learn and share.

It is a relationship, not just a procedure or activity, where one person professionally assists the career development of another, outside the normal manager/subordinate relationship.

(S Mind, 'Business Mentoring and Coaching',
Training and Development, April 1993, p 26)

A deliberate pairing of a more skilled or experienced person with a lesser skilled or experienced one, with the agreed-upon goal of having the less experienced person grow and develop specific competencies.

(M Murray and M Owen, *Beyond the Myths of Mentoring: How to Facilitate an Effective Mentoring Program*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1991, p xiv)

Why a mentoring program?

Mentoring is an effective strategy which can contribute significantly to the career development of employees. It has particular benefits for members of Equal Employment Opportunity groups, who historically have not had good access to employment-based mentoring.

There are good reasons to consider a mentoring program:

- mentoring is a relatively easy to administer strategy which can improve the self-esteem and job competitiveness of women and other EEO group members,
- mentoring is an effective method for the transference of professional, technical and management skills and knowledge,

- mentoring focuses on developing employees' skills and potential, and can thus enhance the diversity of the workforce to reflect the agency's client groups,
- mentoring benefits all concerned — the agency, the mentorees, mentors and other employees — by increasing the skills, flexibility and knowledge of all participating employees, and
- mentoring is conducted in-house and so can meet the particular needs of the agency.

The benefits of mentoring programs

Structured mentoring programs can offer the following benefits to mentorees, mentors and employers.

Benefits to the mentoree

- increased skills and knowledge
- increased potential for career mobility and promotion
- improved understanding of their roles in the organisation
- insights into the culture and unwritten rules of the organisation
- a supportive environment in which successes and failures can be evaluated
- a smoother transition through management levels
- a powerful learning tool to acquire competencies and professional experience
- potential for increased visibility
- networking opportunities
- development of professional skills and self-confidence
- recognition and satisfaction
- empowerment

Benefits to the mentor

- opportunities to test new ideas
- enhanced knowledge of other areas of the agency
- renewed enthusiasm for their role as an experienced employee
- challenging discussions with people who have fresh perspectives
- satisfaction from contributing to the mentoree's development
- opportunities to reflect upon and articulate their role
- improved ability to share experience and knowledge

Benefits to the employer

- improved productivity through more informed and skilled staff
- application of knowledge gained from mentoring
- reduced recruitment and selection costs as a result of higher employee retention
- progress towards equal opportunity in the workplace
- improved communication between separate areas of the agency
- support networks for employees in times of organisational change
- managers with enhanced people management skills
- successful mentorees often become mentors and better people managers

Developing a mentoring program

Plan

Draw up a plan for your mentoring program including:

- the aims
- the desired outcomes
- performance indicators

- how many mentoree/mentor pairs will be in the program
- the level of training and support to be given to mentorees and mentors
- how long the program will run (usually nine to twelve months)
- a timeline which allows for planning, preparation, in-house publicity, conducting information sessions, selection and training of participants
- the cost of running the program, including a facilitator's fee (if required), hiring of training rooms, printing of documents etc
- performance indicators for evaluating the program

Select and match participants

There are various models for matching mentorees with mentors. In deciding which method is best for your mentoring program, consideration will need to be given to the aims of the program, the needs of the mentoree group that the program is aimed at and the culture of your business.

Sometimes, a mentoree and mentor independently form pairs. Usually, however, the participants will need assistance to form pairs.

One strategy is to hold a meeting at which all parties outline their needs and expectations. Subsequently, either the mentorees only or all participants confidentially indicate their first and second preferences for their partner. This process can be facilitated by previous distribution of the career details, strengths and preferences of the mentors to mentorees.

This method will not suit all situations, for example with some cultural groups, and for some employees who would experience the process as too open and threatening.

Another approach is where a facilitator matches mentorees and mentors based on information supplied on a confidential form. Details can include career aspirations, what is hoped to be gained from the program, "demographic" data such as age, particular skills/expertise held, and other information relevant to the program objectives. The facilitator can be assisted in the matching process, as required.

Much has been said and written about male/female pairs. In general, the attributes of the potential mentor are more important than her/his gender.

The effectiveness of the mentoring relationship is the crucial issue. However, some mentorees will feel more comfortable with/want to be matched with a mentor of a certain gender, and it may be wise to include scope for this.

In matching mentorees with mentors the following factors need to be considered:

- the mentor should be a person with greater experience and knowledge and, for the first mentoring experience, usually working in the same area as the mentoree
- the mentor should have a flexible and progressive management style, particularly in people management
- the mentoree must trust the mentor, and know that confidence will be kept
- the mentor needs to be a person who will enjoy helping the mentoree develop skills and knowledge, and be able to share knowledge and experience openly and honestly
- the mentor acts as the mentoree's guide, consultant and coach. While friendship may evolve, it is not the primary goal of the relationship
- it is recommended that the mentor be someone other than the mentoree's immediate manager, in order for the mentoree to expand networks, and to avoid potentially conflicting roles. It is important, however, that the manager be involved in the process and kept informed, so that she/he can contribute to the process

Provide training

Research suggests that the most successful training approach is one which has both separate and combined sessions for mentorees and mentors. Some organisations have also invited the mentorees' managers to the mentor sessions to make them familiar with the process and encourage their co-operation with the program.

It is well to acknowledge that not all those selected to be mentors are totally confident in the role. A mentors' support network can provide a recognised forum for discussion and mutual support.

Monitor, support and evaluate

Particularly in the first two months, support should be offered but care should be taken to avoid intruding into the establishment of the mentoring relationships.

Expect your program to develop and change as your organisation gains more mentoring experience. Programs need to be fluid and flexible to meet the changing attributes and needs of the participants and the business.

All development programs can become more effective with experience and evaluation, but recognise the successes of the program, particularly when communicating results to the rest of your staff.

Source: Edited from Office of the Public Service Commissioner 'Mentoring Made Easy A Guide to Developing and Implementing Successful Mentoring Programs'